

R.P.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9, 1796,

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED FOR

A GENERAL FAST.

BY AN HEREFORDSHIRE CURATE.

J. Luncume.

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Quoddecimo 3:38

79-80/96



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S E R M O N.

ISAIAH I. 15, 16, 17.

—When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you : yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make clean: put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

MANKIND, distinguished from the rest of the creation by the enjoyment of intellectual faculties, can alone forfeit that distinction by their abuse or neglect. If reason cannot influence our conduct, nor peculiar privileges produce peculiar propriety, what real benefits can accrue from our boasted superiority? Principles may be entertaining in theory, but unless reduced into practice, they cannot be beneficial. The powers,

then, of the mind form within us a standard, which, when properly consulted, will teach us to avoid that which is pernicious, and to adopt that only which is commendable and salutary. In what manner the cruel system of "nation rising up against nation, and people against people," which so unfortunately and so widely prevails at this time, can bear the test of such an appeal, is not difficult to decide: if the merit and consequence of those engaged in carrying it into execution, had not attached a respectability, which never justly belonged to war itself---and if the example of almost every age and country, had not in a high degree familiarized its horrors---nothing surely could reconcile to our minds the voluntary introduction of its accumulated evils. If the most esteemed writers on this subject are consulted, they will be found to have uniformly expressed, in the most pointed language, their abhorrence of this practice. At an early period of the Roman history, *Polybius*, a person of great learning, made this distinction between War and Peace---"Peace is a state
 " peculiar to Intellectual Beings, because the desire
 " of it arises from a principle denied to inferior crea-
 " tures: but War arises from a principle which is
 " common to Men and Brutes."* *Quintilian* also, whose works were addressed to the Romans, than

* Polybius, lib. xii. cap. 14.

whom no people were more expert in the operations of war, or more devoted to them, thus gave his sentiments on the subject---“Nature originally endowed the mind of man with a social principle, in order that they might seek and rejoice in the pleasures of friendly and mutual intercourse, and that people of different countries might be induced to assemble together for their common good. Thus places of general residence became built, and thus were introduced all the blessings which dignify human nature, and adorn civilized life.”*

In a similar manner also, *Puffendorf*, in the last century, recommended the cultivation of peace, by describing it as “a state particularly adapted to the welfare and happiness of the human race;” adding, that “to obtain and preserve such a state, is one of the most impressive of the laws of nature.”†

And if war be thus contrary to reason, and to the opinions of esteemed authors who have written on the subject, it cannot but be expected that the tenets of a liberal religion will unite in condemning it. Amongst the earliest communications we read of the Almighty to his creatures, stands the great precept, “Thou shalt not kill.”‡ The history, however,

* Quintilian, decl. 9.

† Puffendorf de Jure Naturæ et Gentium, lib. 8. cap. 6.

‡ Exodus xx. 13.

of God's chosen people abounds with so many violations of this command, that, to trace the origin, progress, and termination of the wars in which they were engaged, appears a probable method of conveying instruction to ourselves. We read * that when the Children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim, when they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who rescued them from their Egyptian oppressors---when they followed other gods, the gods of the people whom they were commissioned to destroy for their wickedness---that then the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he delivered them to the miseries and punishment of war---"he gave them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and sold them into the hands of their enemies, so that they could not stand before them." "Whither soever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, and they were greatly distressed." After this chastisement, the Israelites were re-admitted to the favour of God and their temporal prosperity; but again relapsing into their great crime of idolatry, they were again visited with war, and for a considerable time remained subject to the Kings of Mesopotamia and Moab.† The land is then said to have had rest during a considerable period; till the Children of Israel again

* Judges ii. 12.

† Judges iii.

“doing evil,”* they were delivered into the power of the King of Canaan, “who mightily oppressed them twenty years.” Released from this captivity, their next offence brought them under the subjection of the Ammonians and Philistines, “till Israel was sore distressed.” In this emergency they are represented as crying to God, and saying, “We have sinned against thee!” And the Lord said, “did not I deliver you from all your enemies? yet ye have forsaken me, wherefore, will I deliver you no more: Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of tribulation.”† And the Israelites repeated, “We have sinned; do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day.”‡ And they put away their iniquities from them, and served the Lord, and he was grieved for their misery, and rescued them from their distress. Under the Monarchical form of Government, the same effects were repeatedly experienced: during the integrity of David, his administration was distinguished by wisdom, justice, and clemency; in his own person he acquired respect and esteem, whilst the people enjoyed the blessings of tranquillity and peace. But

* Judges iv.

† Judges x.

‡ Judges xi.

becoming intoxicated with absolute power, his conduct was stained with violence, ambition and pride--- and the Israelites acquiesced in the tyranny he assumed. In consequence, he was severely punished in his own person and family, and, with his subjects, was visited with war, dissensions and pestilence.* A sincere repentance and amendment, at length restored him to the favour of God: and the blessings he had forfeited were returned to him by greater happiness and peace. In the subsequent reign, as long as uprightness and wisdom prevailed, “ the Lord gave rest unto the people, according “ to all that he had promised.”† In his prayer at the dedication of the Temple, Solomon thus adverts to the causes of war, and the means of avoiding its calamities. “ If thy people sin against thee, (for “ there is no man that sinneth not,) and thou be “ angry, and deliver them to the enemy;---yet if “ they bethink themselves and repent, and make “ supplications unto thee, saying, We have sinned, “ and done perversely, we have committed wicked- “ nefs: and so return unto thee with all their heart “ and with all their soul---then hear thou their “ prayer and supplication, and forgive thy people.” So little attended to, however, was the instruction contained in this prayer---so little did the former

* 2 Sam. xxiv.

† 1 Kings viii. 56.

admonitions and chastisements of God avail---and such were the effects of human frailty---that both the king and the people soon after sunk into acts of the grossest idolatry, and the whole tribe of Naphtali was given into the hands of their enemies and taken into Assyria. But even this example failing to produce their reformation, God entirely rejected them all, delivering them into the subjection of the Assyrian King, who carried them away captives, and thus put an end to the kingdom of Israel.

In the kingdom of Judah also, an almost perpetual struggle had subsisted between True Religion and Idolatry: and such at length were the provocations and sin of this tribe, that "in warring
" against them, Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem,
" burnt their Temple, and carried them captives
" into Babylon." The whole history of each plainly shews, that the administration of God's particular providence and government over them for good or evil, was regularly proportioned to the wickedness or virtue of the people---that the calamities of War were almost constantly inflicted as the Punishment of Sin, and were alone to be removed by Repentance and Amendment. These are the plain inferences drawn from the history of the people we have contemplated: still more decisive evidence

may be expected from the doctrines of Christianity. The Prophets who foretold our Saviour's coming, called him the "Prince of Peace." At his mortal birth, we read that a multitude of the heavenly host exclaimed before the Angel and the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good-will towards men." The Apostles who immediately witnessed the effects of his doctrine, declared "he came not to destroy, but to save men's lives." And at his death, Peace was bequeathed to the world---"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you."*

In short, Christianity teaches us the sublime doctrine of loving even our Enemies, and is a system of Universal Benevolence, with which nothing can be more incompatible, than Wars and Strife.

To attempt to particularize the calamities attendant on the system thus opposite to the Religion we profess, would be highly disagreeable to our feelings, on a moment's reflection. That mind must be strangely perverted from its just and natural bias, in which the pangs of mangled fellow-creatures can be stilled by the shouts of the most decisive victory. But, besides the indescribable miseries endured by the immediate sufferers, how numberless and poignant are the afflictions of their

* John xii. 27.

living connexions! how long is the catalogue of those, who, by losing in a father, a husband, or a brother, the means of their support, are left to deplore in wretchedness and want, the horrors of this unnatural and unchristian practice!

If we examine the manners of other nations, who, perhaps, carried this desolating art to its greatest height, we shall find them entitled to little credit, indeed, as civilized people. The perpetual thirst for war which prevailed amongst the Romans, appears to have been preserved by means the most unjustifiable and cruel. The conflicts of their gladiators, could have no other tendency than to render the people ferocious and sanguinary: nor is it possible at this time to reflect without horror, that the lives of their fellow-creatures, who were occasionally either bought* for the purpose, or compelled to the combat, were frequently sacrificed to heighten the entertainment of their public spectacles. But in the eye of reason and humanity, the pretensions of such a people to real civilization, must be utterly groundless; and their memory, in this respect, at least, must be ranked amongst the barbarous ages of the world.

The practice also of a modern nation, and that in Europe,† is, perhaps, still more objectionable;

* Sallust. Bell. Cat. p. 24.

† Turkey.

debasing religion (as it has been too often debased) into an instrument merely political, the great mass of people are deluded into a belief, that the height of every sensual enjoyment (in which the happiness of a future state is represented to consist,) immediately and eternally awaits those who fall in battle. In this instance also, true Religion, Reason, and Humanity teach us to abhor the Agents of Priestcraft and Tyranny, and to commiserate the wretched objects of their oppression and delusion. And, surely, in the farther progress of human reason and improvement, the period will one day arrive, when the desolating system which so unfortunately prevails at present, will be branded with a similar stigma by succeeding generations.

These remarks obviously apply to offensive Wars in every case, and perhaps with equal force to those which are even defensive, unless every rational method and opportunity are sought to avert or conclude them. The causes of Just and Necessary War* are stated by the most eminent writers to be these---The preservation of ourselves and property---the withholding from us rights which have been recognized and acknowledged---and, lastly, satisfaction for injuries received, with security against their future commission. The

* Puffendorf, l. viii. c. 6. Grotius, l. ii. c. 22.

causes of Unjust War are also thus recapitulated--- Avarice, and a desire of possessing the property of others---ambition, and the lust of power---and, lastly, a thirst of increasing our own fame (falsely so called) by the oppression of others. In what particular class the present most calamitous contest is to be placed, and what have been the effects of our interference, are discussions which would be agitated with more propriety in the senate than the pulpit: every friend, however, to humanity and religion would rejoice to be convinced, that it possesses some favourable feature to distinguish it from the general deformity of war. To this kingdom, as a commercial nation, common sense and policy obviously point out its ruinous tendency; but the opportunity of aggrandisement which it affords to a few, has too frequently prevailed against the interests of the whole. The real object of offensive war is generally concealed; the professed one is very seldom attained; and, perhaps, never without a loss and burthen to the community, infinitely beyond the value of the stake contended for. The annals of our own country unfortunately exhibit in the Crusades of the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries, a striking specimen of the folly and impiety which have given rise to war: but it remained for the present age to exhibit an instance of the shame-

less effrontery and wickedness, which, without the form of even pretended provocation, has induced a * tyrant in the north of Europe to carry fire and sword into her neighbour's territories, in order to make slaves of the one, and plunder of the other!

A brief recapitulation of what has been offered, will naturally give rise to a few observations, which, with the divine assistance, and our own endeavours, it is hoped, may conduce to our instruction and advantage.

We find that the practice of destroying each other by War, is wholly irreconcilable to Reason and Philosophy. The Old Testament, in the account of the Israelites, informs us, that the various Calamities of War which were so frequently, and so severely felt by that people, who are represented to have been under the peculiar providence and government of God, were constantly inflicted as the Scourge and Punishment of Sin. The New Testament assures us, that War is totally opposite to the doctrines of Christianity. The histories of other nations prove, that it tends to render people uncivilized and ferocious---and the experience of even modern times, convinces us that Wars may derive their ori-

* Omnes autem et habentur et dicuntur *tyranni*, qui potestate sunt perpetuâ, in eâ civitate quæ libertate usa est.

Corn. Nepos in Milt. c. 8.

gin from Unjust Motives---and that no Benefits can be likely to accrue to a community from the practice, which will not be infinitely more than counterbalanced, by the certain Evils and Miseries it introduces.

May it then be our sincere endeavour to turn the solemnity of this day to our serious and lasting advantage---may we, as reasonable creatures and Christians, entertain a just and decided abhorrence of War, under whatever plausible views it may be provoked or carried on. Above all, may we by sincere repentance and amendment of our conduct, endeavour to avert that wrath and displeasure of God, which appear by man's provocation and sin, to have first brought this terrible scourge upon the earth---let us "cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment; relieve the oppressed; judge the fatherless; plead for the widow."---In the pure spirit of Christianity, let us pray even for our enemies, recollecting that to solicit their Destruction, can never be acceptable to the common Father of Mankind, whose mercy and love extend over all his works; who "hateth nothing that he hath made," and who is constantly invoked by us as the God of Mercy and Peace. In short, may individual exertion effect the great purpose of a general reformation of our lives and con-

duct, and so promote the interests of true religion,
that at length all mankind may be united in one
fold, under one Shepherd, giving "Glory to God
" in the highest," and promoting "on earth Peace
" and Good-will towards men."



